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## *A Fitting End? Self-Denial and a Slave's Death in Mark's Life of Jesus.*

Helen K. Bond, School of Divinity, University of Edinburgh, Mound Place, Edinburgh, EH1 2LX, Scotland.

Email: [h.bond@ed.ac.uk](mailto:h.bond@ed.ac.uk)

**The present article argues that rather than look for a traditional Jewish model behind Mark's passion narrative (such as an account of the 'suffering righteous one'), we would do better to understand the composition of the whole gospel – both the central body of teaching in 8.22-10.45 *and* the passion narrative – as influenced by the genre of ancient philosophical lives. After considering ways in which biographies tended to present the deaths of philosophers, the article examines the death of the Markan Jesus as an example of a shameful, humiliating end. What redeems it for Mark is the fact that Jesus dies in perfect conformity with his teaching. The carefully composed central section of teaching material (8.22-10.52), it is argued, was put together by the evangelist with the specific intention of showing that Jesus died in accordance with his teaching. Thus the crucifixion could become the perfect embodiment of Jesus' counter-cultural message of self-denial and servanthood, and therefore a powerful symbol of its truth.**

Keywords: Mark, Passion Narrative, biography, *bios*, death of a philosopher, crucifixion.

'The condition of human life is chiefly determined by its first and last days, because it is of the greatest importance under what auspices it is begun and with what end it is terminated.'

Valerius Maximus.<sup>1</sup>

'Like a hero in battle, a wise man is not fully confirmed until the moment of his death.'

Sergi Grau.<sup>2</sup>

It is commonly maintained that Mark's Passion Narrative owes a great deal to earlier tradition. Most common is the view that the author used a source that interpreted the death of Jesus according to scriptural models - the Suffering Righteous One perhaps, or more specifically Isaiah's Suffering Servant. And while Mark clearly edited this source according to his theological and pastoral interests, it is generally assumed that its original contours are still visible and that it continues to exert an influence over the interpretation of Mark's final chapters.<sup>3</sup> Thus the death of Jesus fits rather awkwardly in Mark – a terrible, shameful end without an appearance of the risen Jesus to redeem it.

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<sup>1</sup> *Memorable Doings and Sayings* ("On Deaths out of the Ordinary") 9.12 praef. LCL 493, trans. D. R. Shackleton Bailey. This article was given as a main paper at the SNTS meeting in Athens in August 2018, and again to the Oxford New Testament Seminar in November 2018. I would like to thank all of those who offered helpful advice and criticism on both of those occasions.

<sup>2</sup> S. Grau 'How to Kill a Philosopher: The Narrating of Ancient Greek Philosopher's Deaths in Relation to their Way of Living,' *AP* 30 (2010) 347-81, here 348.

<sup>3</sup> This was initially proposed by M. Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel* (trans. B. L. Woolf. London: Nicholson & Watson, 1934) 178-217 and was given more impetus in recent times by G. W. E. Nicklesburg, 'The Genre and Function of the Markan Passion Narrative,' *HTR* (1980) 153-84. The literature on the pre-Markan passion narrative is vast. For an excellent survey, see A. Y. Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Hermeneia. Minneapolis:

There is, however, one basic problem with this approach. Despite its enduring popularity, there is simply no evidence for a pre-Markan passion narrative. The hypothetical source was conjured up by the form critics to account for a portion of the gospel which did not readily submit to their methods, and the inability of scholars to agree on either the extent or the contents of this source should have alerted us long ago to its dubious nature.<sup>4</sup> More positively, decades of close reading from both redaction and more recently narrative critics have shown that the same literary style, patterning of sequences, and theological themes runs throughout the whole work, with nothing to indicate the use of a significantly new source in chapter 14.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the growing consensus that Mark is an example of an ancient biography encourages us to see similarities with other ancient *bioi*, which similarly swap an earlier topical structure for a chronological one when it comes to describing the hero's death (we might think of Lucian's *Demonax* here, or Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars*).<sup>6</sup>

The present paper proposes a rather different model for Mark's final chapters, one that takes seriously both the author's creative abilities and – more significantly perhaps – the nature of his work as one of the earliest biographies of Jesus (perhaps even *the* earliest biography of Jesus). My suggestion is that Mark's composition of the work as a whole – both the account of the crucifixion *and* the teaching in the central section (8.22-10.52) – was driven by the model of the philosopher who dies in perfect conformity with his teaching. Just as Jesus teaches his followers to deny themselves, to shun honour as the world understands it and to become as servants to one another, so he will himself suffer a slave's death, the logical extension of his teaching. Despite its apparent shame and humiliation, Jesus' crucifixion served as the perfect embodiment of his message, and therefore as a powerful symbol of its truth.

I shall start by looking at how the deaths of philosophers tended to be described by their biographers. I shall then turn to Mark's work, noting similarities between the central body of teaching and Jesus' death, and conclude with a few more general comments concerning Mark's strategies to redeem Jesus' violent end.

### *The Death of a Philosopher*

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Fortress, 2007), 620-39 (Collins herself proposes a source which simply told of the 'death of a famous man,' a *teleutē* in Greek, or *exitus* in Latin).

<sup>4</sup> For a (largely inconclusive) attempt to bring order to scholarship on this 'source,' see the analysis by M. L. Soards, 'Appendix IX: The Question of a Pre-Markan Passion Narrative' in R. E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 1492-1524; and also the discussion in W. R. Telford, 'The Pre-Markan Tradition in Recent Research (1980-1990)' in F. van Segbroeck et al, eds., *The Four Gospels 1992: Festschrift for Frans Neirynck* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1992) II: 693-723. Those who doubt the existence of this source include E. Linnemann, *Studien zur Passionsgeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1970); the contributors to W. H. Kelber (ed.), *The Passion in Mark: Studies on Mark 14-16* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976); F. J. Matera, *The Kingship of Jesus: Composition and Theology in Mark 15* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982), and more recently W. Arnal, "Major Episodes in the Biography of Jesus. An Assessment of the Historicity of the Narrative Tradition," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 13 (1997) 201-26, esp. 209-215.

<sup>5</sup> This was apparent as long ago as the 1920s, in C. H. Turner's series of detailed analyses of Mark's Greek syntax and vocabulary; the original articles were published in various editions of *JTS* but are now conveniently gathered together in C. H. Turner and J. K. Elliott, *The Language and Style of the Gospel of Mark: an Edition of C. H. Turner's "Notes on Marcan Usage" together with Other Comparable Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> See the discussions in R. A. Burridge, *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (3rd edn. Waco: Baylor, 2018); H. Cancik, 'Bios und Logos: Formgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zu Lukians "Demonax"' in H. Cancik (ed), *Markus – Philologie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1984) 115-30; and D. E. Aune, *The New Testament in its Literary Environment* (Westminster John Knox, 1987) 17-76.

The preoccupation of the Roman elite with death in the early imperial period is well documented.<sup>7</sup> The turbulent political climate in the dying days of the Republic, along with the state executions and forced suicides in the reigns of the ‘bad’ emperors (notably Nero and Domitian) created a culture in which the manner of a person’s exit became particularly important. Stories of noble deaths were drummed into Roman boys from their youth (Seneca, *Epistles* 24.6), and collections of deaths appear to have been common (so-called *exitus* literature).<sup>8</sup> A striking feature of Roman heroes from the civil war onwards is that their glorious deaths often occur in the context of failure and defeat. As Carlin Barton observes, heroic figures in this period tend to be drawn from the disgraced and redeemed.<sup>9</sup> We might think of Cato the Younger, the Stoic Opposition, or legendary characters who became popular at this time: Mucius Scaevola, for example, who was captured while sneaking into the Etruscan camp but restored his honour by putting his sword hand into the altar fire and watching impassively as it burned.<sup>10</sup> Or Publius Decius Mus, who, seeing his men suffer heavy losses in battle, dedicated himself to the infernal gods and through his death spurred the Romans on to victory.<sup>11</sup> The vital thing in all these stories is the way in which the hero faces death: it is clear that *the manner of his end mattered far more than what killed him*.

A person’s death was felt to be an indication of his or her true character, so it is hardly surprising to find biographers taking a particular interest in their subject’s exit. Suetonius’ *Lives of the Caesars* provides a good example of how a biographer can use a well-composed death-scene to pass judgment on his subject. The ‘good’ emperor Augustus dies quietly at home with his wife, the peace and control of his passing reflects the harmony and stability that he has brought to the empire, and his supreme dignity is maintained to the end.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, Nero’s snivelling and unmanly behaviour marks his end as abhorrent and shameful (*Nero* 49). A calm, courageous, dignified acceptance of one’s fate marked a good death, while loss of control, frenzied begging for mercy and an unwillingness to face one’s end marked its opposite.

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<sup>7</sup> There is a large literature on death in antiquity, see for example D. G. Kyle, *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome* (London: Routledge, 1999); V. M. Hope, *Death in Ancient Rome: A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 2007); C. Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome* (New Haven: YUP, 2007); J. Ker, *The Deaths of Seneca* (Oxford: OUP, 2009). On noble death traditions in particular, see H.A. Musurillo, *The Acts of the Pagan Martyrs: Acta Alexandrinorum* (Oxford: OUP, 1954) 236-46; A. Ronconi, *Exitus illustrium virorum*, *RAC* 6 (1966) 1258-68; D. Seeley, *The Noble Death: Graeco-Roman Martyrology and Paul’s Concept of Salvation* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), esp. 83-141; A. J. Droge and J.D. Tabor, *A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom among Christians and Jews in Antiquity* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992); A. Y. Collins, ‘The Genre of the Passion Narrative,’ *ST* 47 (1993) 3-28; G. Sterling, ‘Mors philosophi: The Death of Jesus in Luke,’ *HTR* 94 (2001) 383-402; J.-W. van Henten and F. Avemarie, *Martyrdom and Noble Death: Selected Texts from Graeco-Roman, Jewish and Christian Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 2002); and R. Doran, ‘Narratives of Noble Death’ in A.-J. Levine, D. C. Allison and J. D. Crossan, eds., *The Historical Jesus in Context* (Princeton: PUP, 2006) 385-99.

<sup>8</sup> Such works are referred to by Pliny (Younger), *Epistles* 5.5.3, 8.12. On this literature, see F. A. Marx, ‘Tacitus und die Literatur der exitus illustrium virorum,’ *Philologus* 92 (1937): 83-103; Ronconi, ‘Exitus’; J. Ker, *Deaths*, pp. 41-62; and T. Hägg, *The Art of Biography in Antiquity* (Cambridge: CUP, 2012) 236-8.

<sup>9</sup> C. A. Barton, ‘Savage Miracles: The Redemption of Lost Honor in Roman Society and the Sacrament of the Gladiator and the Martyr,’ *Representations* 45 (1994) 41-71.

<sup>10</sup> The story is in Livy 2.12-14; see also Seneca, *Epistles* 24.5; on Martial’s poems about a gladiator playing the part of Scaevola, see Barton, ‘Savage Miracles,’ 41-44.

<sup>11</sup> Livy 8.9.1-8.10; see Doran, ‘Narratives of Noble Death,’ 387-9. Van Henten and Avemarie link this story to Roman traditions of *devotio*, or dedication by a general of himself or the enemy’s army (or both) to the Gods of the underworld; *Martyrdom*, 19-21.

<sup>12</sup> On Suetonius’ account of Augustus’ death, see M. Toher, ‘The “Exitus” of Augustus,’ *Hermes* 140 (2012) 37-44; on Suetonius’ death scenes more generally, see R. Ash, ‘Never Say Die! Assassinating Emperors in Suetonius’ *Lives of the Caesars*,’ in K. De Temmerman and K. Demoen, eds., *Writing Biography in Greece and Rome: Narrative Technique and Fictionalization* (Cambridge: CUP, 2016) 200-16.

Of particular interest to the present study are the deaths of philosophers. In a detailed analysis of the monumental work of Diogenes Laertius, Sergi Grau observes that '[l]ike a hero in battle, a wise man is not fully confirmed until the moment of his death.'<sup>13</sup> Philosophers offered practical guidance on how to live in a meaningful way, and it was only to be expected that they should put those principles to good use in their own lives. The philosopher thus became the supreme example of his own doctrine. What was crucial was that his end should be in keeping with his teaching, that death was simply an extension of the principles by which he lived. A good death, a blissful even joyful exit in extreme old age, underscored not only the integrity of the philosopher, but also the truth and consistency of his teaching. Conversely, a bad death, from disease or a ridiculous accident, undermined both the philosopher and the authenticity of his message. Both extremes are well illustrated in the works of Lucian. His own teacher, Demonax, died peacefully in old age, exerting control over his own death and retaining his wisdom and humour to the end (*Demonax* 65). In contrast, his *Passing of Peregrinus* satirizes a pointless philosophical death, the showy end of a man preoccupied only with acquiring personal fame and glory (*Peregrinus* 35-39).<sup>14</sup>

A variant on the good death in extreme old age was the philosopher who met a violent end, defending his philosophical convictions to the last. Grau refers to such men as 'martyrs of philosophy,' people who stood firm despite torture and eventual execution at the hands of tyrants. Exemplary here were Zeno of Elea and Anaxarchus of Abdera, who both stood firm before tyrants.<sup>15</sup> The ultimate paradigm, however, was Socrates. Not only did he face his end with a courageous spirit, but just as importantly his death emphasized the truth and consistency of his teaching. Throughout life, he had already distanced himself from the pursuits and distractions of the flesh. Showing no anguish, he faced his end with fearlessness and nobility, safe in the assurance that his soul would live on in a better world. As the numbness from the poison spread from his feet up through his body, he faded gently from life, the moment of death almost imperceptible as his soul was set free from its physical prison. He was released from life without violence because he had practically released himself already; death for him was simply one more step along the path he had already travelled, so that at the end there was nothing to constrain his eternal soul.

Yet, as Christopher Gill notes, this is hardly a credible portrayal of the effects of hemlock poisoning – which involved trembling, spasms, convulsions, vomiting, and finally organ failure.<sup>16</sup> However the "historical Socrates" died, it was not like this. Clearly what mattered most was not historical detail, *but the way that the story was told* - the details, additions, or omissions, that transformed even a hideous state execution into something noble and praiseworthy. Indeed, there seems to have been a general expectation that authors might be allowed a certain amount of artistic license when it came to describing their subject's demise. Cicero for example, maintained that historians have a right when describing death to 'adorn it rhetorically and tragically' (*Brutus* 11.42). Even when writing about some of the most documented men of his day, Suetonius seems to have been free both to invent details

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<sup>13</sup> See above, n.1; similar sentiments are expressed by E. Kechagia, 'Dying Philosophers in Ancient Biography: Zeno the Stoic and Epicurus,' in De Temmerman and Demoen, eds., *Writing Biography*, 181-99; also Burridge, *What Are?* 160-2.

<sup>14</sup> See also Lucian, *Alex.* 59-60 and Philo, *Mos.* 2.288. On the extraordinary death of Moses, both in Philo and other roughly contemporary Jewish literature, see L. H. Feldman, *Philo's Portrayal of Moses in the Context of Ancient Judaism* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 2007) 220-33.

<sup>15</sup> Both are described by Diogenes Laertius in his *Lives of the Philosophers*; on Zeno, see 9.26-7; on Anaxarchus, see 9.58-9.

<sup>16</sup> C. Gill, 'The Death of Socrates,' *CQ* 23 (1973) 25-28. For a useful introduction to Plato's *Phaedo*, see H. Tarrant, *Plato: The Last Days of Socrates* (London: Penguin, 2003) 99-115. In the case of Livy's Decius Mus, mentioned above, it is not even clear that he took part in the battle at all! See Doran, 'Narratives of Noble Death,' 385.

and to introduce an artistic patterning across his whole sequence of death scenes.<sup>17</sup> Last words were particularly susceptible to ‘improvement,’ and few biographers worth their craft could resist the temptation to assign an apposite and revealing final quotation.<sup>18</sup>

Often a biographer would find conflicting accounts of a subject’s end in his sources. The same exit might be described in very different ways, depending on who was doing the telling. A man’s friends would be quick to point to the nobility of his passing, while detractors would find evidence of an unmanly spirit. Diogenes Laertius was well aware that several of his philosophers had attracted competing accounts of their ends; rather than choose between them, he preferred to report them all. Thus we are told that various accounts of Diogenes the Cynic’s death were in circulation: some said he was seized with colic after eating raw octopus, others that he was bitten on the foot while dividing an octopus between his dogs, but a third version (favoured by his friends) was that he held his breath in a deliberate attempt to end his life (*Lives* 6.2.76-77).<sup>19</sup> Clearly a philosopher’s final moments were often a contested issue, with rival groups of followers or opponents producing versions to suit their own estimation of the man and his message. In most cases, of course, the biographer would simply choose whichever account best suited his purposes.

It was vitally important, then, that Mark should give his hero a commendable exit, one which continued to demonstrate and reflect his earlier way of life and teaching. But how exactly was this to be done? I shall begin at the place where Mark undoubtedly also began – with an appreciation of the full horror of Jesus’ humiliating death.

### *A Slave’s Death*

Crucifixion was the most shameful, brutal and degrading form of capital punishment known to the ancient world, reserved for slaves, brigands and any who set themselves up against imperial rule.<sup>20</sup> It was intended to be public, to act both as a deterrent to others and to provide spectacle, even entertainment, to onlookers.<sup>21</sup> It was a form of death in which the caprice and sadism of the executioners was allowed full reign, as they devised ever more gruesome ways to ridicule the condemned.<sup>22</sup> Stripped naked, the victim was humiliated and shamed as he suffered extreme agony, perhaps for several days, until, overcome by suffocation and exhaustion, the merciful end would come. So offensive was the cross that civilized people preferred not to talk about it, and few Roman writers ever dwelt on any of the details.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> So Ash, ‘Never Say Die!’; for similar features in Diogenes Laertius, see Kechagia, ‘Dying Philosophers.’

<sup>18</sup> J. M. Smith, ‘Famous (or not so Famous) Last Words,’ paper given to the Markan Literary Sources Section, SBL Annual Meeting, Atlanta, 2016.

<sup>19</sup> See also the various accounts of the ends of Menedemus (2.17.142-3), Heraclides (5.6.89-91), Chrysippus (7.7.184-5), Pythagoras (8.1.39-40), Empedocles (8.2.67-75), and Zeno of Elea (9.5.26-28). Philostratus, too, indicates that there were differing accounts of Apollonius’ end (*Apoll.* 8.29-30).

<sup>20</sup> See M. Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Cross* (London: SCM, 1977); D. W. Chapman, *Perceptions of Crucifixion Among Jews and Christians in the Ancient World* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008); J. G. Cook, *Crucifixion in the Mediterranean World* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014).

<sup>21</sup> On ridicule and spectacle (and also on the sociological question of what made executions compelling to the crowd) see K. M. Coleman, ‘Fatale Charades: Roman Executions Staged as Mythological Enactments,’ *JRS* 80 (1990) 44-73.

<sup>22</sup> For the association of the cross and mockery, see Josephus, *War* 5.51, Seneca, *Dialogue 6: On the Consolation to Marcia* 20.3; Philo, *On Flaccus* 73-85; and Suetonius, *Galba* 9.1. On parody more specifically, see J. Marcus, ‘Crucifixion as Parodic Exaltation,’ *JBL* 125 (2006) 73-78, and my essay “‘You’ll Probably Get away with Crucifixion’: Laughing at the Cross in the *Life of Brian* and the Ancient World,” in J. E. Taylor, ed., *Jesus and Brian* (London: T & T Clark/Bloomsbury, 2015) 113-26.

<sup>23</sup> So Cicero, *For Rabirius* 16; more generally, Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 37-38. For Jews, the victim brought a curse on the land, see P. W. Martens, “‘Anyone Hung on a Tree is under God’s Curse’ (Deuteronomy 21:23): Jesus’ Crucifixion and Interreligious Exegetical Debate in Late Antiquity,” *Ex Auditu* 26 (2010) 69-90.

Cicero described crucifixion as ‘the greatest punishment of slavery’ (*Verr.* 2.5), while Josephus labelled it ‘the most pitiable of deaths’ (*War* 7.203).

Jesus’ crucifixion would have come down to Mark as part of his inherited tradition and was presumably too well known to be omitted or lightly brushed aside. In any case, its salvific effect was a crucial part of Christian teaching, as Paul’s letters make clear.<sup>24</sup> A work like ‘Q,’ which was largely a series of sayings, might not need a coherent account of Jesus’ demise (though even here it is clearly alluded to, Luke/Q 11.49-51).<sup>25</sup> A biography of Jesus, however, would need to face it head on. But how should it be done?

I have already noted my scepticism regarding a pre-Markan passion narrative, an early source that was so well known and influential that Mark felt compelled to include it. But this does not, of course, mean that Mark had no sources or traditions before him. Quite the contrary – it seems to me that there were likely to have been many accounts of Jesus’ death in existence, some perhaps already in written form.<sup>26</sup> Already in the 50s, Paul could link Jesus’ death to the paschal lamb (1 Cor 5.7), the Servant of the Lord (Phil 2.5-11), and even the curse of Deut 21.23 (Gal 3.13). The heavy use of LXX Ps 21 in Mark’s crucifixion scene suggests that this, too, was traditional. All of these were attempts to come to terms with Jesus’ violent death, to make sense of it against the history of Israel, and to construct a distinctively Christian story around it. The commemoration of the Eucharist would undoubtedly have ensured that one, or perhaps several, of these understandings were articulated over and over again within Mark’s Christian fellowship. My working assumption is that, although Mark drew on many of these traditions, he was himself responsible for selecting and crafting his material (sometimes quite substantially). I see Mark’s work as a very specific reception of the Jesus tradition, one that harnessed disparate sources and collective memories of Jesus and transposed them into the expectations of a particular literary genre. Adapting material so that it fitted into a biography, particularly a biography of a revered teacher, was by no means a mechanical undertaking. Traditions, anecdotes and sayings had to be weighed, sifted, and placed appropriately; connections needed to be made across various sections; and the final product needed both to produce a pleasing effect and to speak to the present needs of the anticipated audience.

Our familiarity with Mark’s account of the crucifixion should not blind us to the fact that our author had many other options. The cross itself was a given, but almost all of the details could have been written up differently. Mark could, for example, have recorded Jesus’ death fairly briefly; instead, he seems to dwell on it, to go out of his way to describe Jesus’ last few moments at length, producing the longest account of a crucifixion to have come down to us from antiquity.<sup>27</sup> It would have taken some skill, but even a crucifixion could – like hemlock poisoning – have been redeemed. Jesus could have shown courage and

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<sup>24</sup> On the cross in Paul, see J. D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (London: T & T Clark/Continuum, 1998) 207-33.

<sup>25</sup> On Jesus’ death in Q, see A. Kirk, ‘The Memory of Violence and the Death of Jesus in Q,’ in A. Kirk and T. Thatcher, eds., *Memory, Tradition and Text: Uses of the Past in Early Christianity* (Atlanta: SBL, 2005) 191-206.

<sup>26</sup> For fuller discussion, see A. J. Dewey, ‘The Locus for Death: Social Memory and the Passion Narratives’ in Kirk and Thatcher, eds., *Memory, Tradition and Text*, 119-28.

<sup>27</sup> So also M. Goodacre, ‘Scripturalization in Mark’s Crucifixion Narrative,’ in G. Van Oyen and T. Shepherd, eds., *The Trial and Death of Jesus: Essays on the Passion Narrative in Mark* (Leuven: Peeters, 2006) 33-47, here 34. The length of Mark’s passion narrative has sometimes been seen as incompatible with identifying the work as a *bios* – see for example M. Edwards, ‘Gospel and Genre: Some Reservations’ in B. C. McGing and J. Mossman, eds., *The Limits of Ancient Biography* (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2006) 51-75. However, R. Burridge’s detailed comparison of the gospels with contemporary *bioi* has shown that while Mark’s work is certainly at the extreme limits of what might be thought acceptable, it is by no means without parallels, *What are the Gospels?* 162, 192.

calmness throughout, blissfully giving up his spirit in the final moment, perhaps with the voice of God commending his actions. More specifically, Jesus could have been cast as an innocent martyr,<sup>28</sup> with the hero displaying a noble spirit and a stoic indifference to death. But although Mark does include a handful of more ‘noble’ features (which we shall come back to), this is not the dominant tone of his narrative. There is no getting away from the fact that Mark’s account, particularly in the crucifixion scene, is the very opposite of a “good death”: Jesus dies alone, in agonized torment, with no one to perform even the most basic rites. As Adela Collins puts it, Jesus’ death in Mark is “anguished, human, and realistic.”<sup>29</sup>

Rather than reading Mark’s crucifixion against more traditionally ‘noble’ categories, we would do better to look at the way in which our author actually works with his material. One striking feature is that, despite its length, the narrative contains surprisingly little on Jesus’ physical sufferings. He is beaten by Jewish council guards (14.65), flogged by Roman soldiers (15.15), and crucified (15.24, noted again in 15.25), but Mark does not dwell on any of this. There is no gory interest in torture, or praise of endurance such as we find in accounts of the Jewish martyrs or the Greek Anaxarchus. What Mark does emphasize, however, are the negative associations commonly linked to crucifixion: the victim’s passivity, the general sense of mockery, and the final abandonment. Each of these is worth exploring in more detail.

The Markan Jesus becomes increasingly passive as the scenes unfold. The once authoritative, combative Jesus who bested opponents with ease, is gradually silenced by the narrative. He speaks boldly before the High Priest (14.62), but manages only two words before Pilate (15.2), and after that says nothing until his agonised cry on the cross. Nor does the omniscient narrator give us any further insight into his thoughts or feelings.<sup>30</sup> Others assert their power over Jesus’ body: arresting him (14.43-50), beating him (14.65), binding him (15.1), scourging him (15.15), changing his clothes (15.16-20), and finally crucifying him (15.24). His lack of agency is emphasised by the verb *paradidōmi*, as he is passed from one authority to another (9.31, 10.33, 14.10-11, 18, 21, 41-42, 15.1, 10, 15). Like a slave, Jesus endures it all, disempowered, humiliated, shamed, violated - nothing less manly and dishonourable could be imagined.<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps even more striking is the mockery here. It begins already in Pilate’s court. ‘Are you the King of the Jews?’ the prefect asks (15.2), and the repeated use of this phrase, even towards a crowd which has clearly expressed its preference for an insurrectionary, can only be read as a taunt.<sup>32</sup> Once Jesus is passed into the hands of the Roman soldiers, the

<sup>28</sup> So Luke, see J. S. Kloppenborg, “‘Excitus clari viri’: The Death of Jesus in Luke,” *TJT* 8 (1992) 106-20; Sterling, ‘Mors philosophi’; Scaer, *Luke’s Passion and the Praiseworthy Death* (Sheffield: Phoenix, 2005); K. Iverson, ‘The Present tense of performance: The Immediacy and Transformative Power in Luke’s Passion’ in K. R. Iverson, ed., *From Text to Performance: Narrative and Performance Criticisms in Dialogue and Debate* (Eugene, OR.: Cascade, 2014) 131-57.

<sup>29</sup> A. Y. Collins, ‘Mark’s Interpretation of the Death of Jesus,’ *JBL* 128 (2009): 545-554, here 553-4.

<sup>30</sup> See R. C. Tannehill, ‘The Gospel of Mark as Narrative Christology,’ *Semeia* 16 (1979) 57-95, here 80-81. S. S. Elliott also notes parallels with the *Life of Aesop* which similarly depicts a character ‘swallowed up by the narrative plot that created him’ (though Aesop’s death is much less central to his *bios* than that of Jesus); “‘Witless in your own Cause’: Divine Plots and Fractured Characters in the Life of Aesop and the Gospel of Mark,” *Religion and Theology* 12 (2005) 397-418, here 407.

<sup>31</sup> On masculinity in the ancient world, see B. E. Wilson, *Unmanly Men: Refigurations of Masculinity in Luke-Acts* (Oxford: OUP, 2015), 39-75, and 190-242 on Jesus’ crucifixion (Wilson is discussing the Lukan version, but her comments are even more pertinent with respect to Mark). See also T. B. Liew, ‘Re-Mark-able Masculinities: Jesus, the Son of Man, and the (Sad) Sum of Manhood.’ In S. D. Moore and J.C. Anderson (eds.), *New Testament Masculinities* (Atlanta: SBL, 2003), 93-135.

<sup>32</sup> See my study, *Pontius Pilate in History and Interpretation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998) 99-119. On mockery more generally in the ancient world, see D. Neufeld, *Mockery and Secretism in the Social World of Mark’s Gospel* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014) 36-77.



mockery becomes even more intense. Now he is dressed up in imperial purple and given a crown, while the soldiers salute him, strike and spit upon him, and kneel down in mock-homage (15.16-20). Clearly they find the idea that such a man might be ‘King of the Jews’ utterly ridiculous. Once they emerge from the *praetorium*, the soldiers commandeer Simon of Cyrene to carry Jesus’ cross. While this is often seen as a gesture of goodwill, there is no textual warrant for such a claim. Those who press Simon into service are exactly the same people who have just mocked Jesus and subjected him to abuse. It is better to understand their actions here as a continuation of the mockery. Simon takes his place in the grim procession to Calvary, forced to carry the condemned man’s crossbeam like a magistrate’s lictor with his *fascies*.<sup>33</sup> Jesus’ Roman executioners are unrelenting in their brutality: they offer him wine mixed with myrrh, not as an analgesic but as a further means of torture,<sup>34</sup> and, as a final insult, they attach the scornful title ‘King of the Jews’ over his dying body. Even on the cross, the ridicule continues, now from passers-by, chief priests and scribes, and even those crucified with him (15.29-32).

Finally, Jesus dies abandoned by all. The teacher who only a few days previously attracted large and enthusiastic crowds at his entry to the city (11.9-10) is now rejected by everyone: first by Judas, ‘one of the Twelve’ (14.10-11), then by the rest of the disciples (14.50), a naked young man (14.51),<sup>35</sup> Peter (14.66-72), and the crowd (15.6-15). On the cross, the Markan Jesus endures the depths of abandonment and degradation, articulated through the words of LXX Ps 21. The psalm plays an important role in the crucifixion scene and may well go back to an early stage of reflection on Jesus’ death,<sup>36</sup> but within its present Markan context it expresses the hero’s sense of utter desolation.<sup>37</sup> This comes out most strongly in Jesus’ last audible cry: ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ (15.34).<sup>38</sup> Despite attempts to argue differently, it is better to take Mark’s text at face value here: his Jesus dies in utter desolation, abandoned not only by his erstwhile followers, but apparently by God himself.<sup>39</sup> Last words, as we have seen, were particularly important within the biographical tradition. Socrates’ command to offer a cock to Asclepius expressed his piety (despite his conviction for atheism), and was perhaps an ironic jest that he was now ‘cured’ from physical existence. Lucian’s Demonax dies with humorous words on his lips; Suetonius was always careful to record fitting last words for his emperors; and even a manly silence

<sup>33</sup> For a fuller argument, see my essay, ‘Paragon of Discipleship? Simon of Cyrene in the Markan Passion Narrative’ in K. A. Bendoraitis and N. K. Gupta, eds., *Matthew and Mark Across Perspectives: Essays in Honour of Stephen C. Barton and William R Telford* (LNTS, T&T Clark, 2016) 18-35.

<sup>34</sup> See E. Koskenniemi, K. Nisula and J. Toppari, ‘Wine Mixed with Myrrh (Mark 15:23) and *Crurifragium* (John 19:31-32): Two Details of the Passion Narratives,’ *JSNT* 27 (2005) 379-91.

<sup>35</sup> On the flight of the naked young man as a contrast to Jesus’ calm acceptance, see H. Fleddermann, ‘The Flight of a Naked Young Man (Mark 14:51-52),’ *CBQ* 41 (1979) 412-18.

<sup>36</sup> Christ-followers tried to make sense of his death from the earliest days and would naturally have been drawn to the psalms, with their strongly emotional language and themes of rejection and vindication. On the use of the psalms in Mark, see S. P. Ahearne-Kroll, *The Psalms of Lament in Mark’s Passion: Jesus’ Davidic Suffering* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007).

<sup>37</sup> Useful discussions can be found in Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, 1455-65 and K. S. O’Brien, *Use of Scripture in the Markan Passion Narrative* (London: T & T Clark/Continuum, 2010).

<sup>38</sup> Much has been written on this verse, with a sizeable body of scholars arguing that Mark intends his audience to understand the cry in the light of the *ending* of the psalm, which seems to finish on an optimistic note. There is, however, nothing in the Markan text which would seem to warrant such a view, and Mark could not be sure that even a Jewish-Christian audience would be sufficiently familiar with the psalm to make the connection. Moreover, S. P. Ahearne-Kroll has recently argued that the ending of LXX Ps 21 is not a new situation of thanksgiving, but is still pleading with God to intervene; ‘Challenging the Divine: LXX Psalm 21 in the Passion Narrative of the Gospel of Mark,’ in Van Oyen and Shepherd (eds.), *Trial and Death of Jesus*, 119-48.

<sup>39</sup> So also M. D. Hooker, *Not Ashamed of the Gospel: New Testament Interpretations of the Death of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 64.

could be commendable.<sup>40</sup> In contrast to all of this, Jesus' cry of desolation signifies a bad death, a wretched and miserable exit, fully in keeping with his servile execution.

In this vivid scene, Mark has turned conventional ideas of a good death upside down. He has gone out of his way to emphasize Jesus' passivity, the mockery that he endured, and his abandonment and degradation. In order to appreciate the full scope of what our author is doing, we need to turn back for a moment to the earlier parts of the biography, first to the opening chapters, and then to the major body of teaching in 8.22-10.52.

### *Teaching and Showing the Way*

Mark begins his biography by sketching a portrait of Jesus that would be attractive to Jew and Gentile alike. He is adopted by God as his Son (1.9-11) and quickly shows himself to be a force to be reckoned with. Thoroughly at home in the public sphere, he energetically travels throughout Galilee in the company of his male companions, outmaneuvering opponents wherever he goes. He is a powerful healer, one able to rally crowds and inspire amazement in all he does (1.27-8, 2.12, 5.42, and so on); a man who can provide food for thousands of people (6.30-44, 8.1-10), control the forces of nature (4.35-41, 6.45-52), and even raise the dead (5.21-24). Although worthy of high honour, he refuses titles and public esteem, modestly referring to himself only as the 'Son of Man.'<sup>41</sup> We are presented in these opening chapters with an authoritative, self-controlled Jesus, offering benefactions to all who petition him, and demonstrating many of the qualities prized by elite males.

Although referred to as 'teacher,' however, the main body of instruction is reserved for the central section of the biography, in 8.22-10.52. Here the Markan Jesus turns all worldly conceptions of honour on their head in favour of a deeply counter-cultural, shocking and distasteful focus on what contemporary society would usually brand as shameful.<sup>42</sup> Disciples are called on to deny themselves, to act as slaves or servants to one another, and to care nothing for status or prestige. They are asked to give up everything – not only riches (10.17-22) but homes and families too (10.23-30), and possibly even their lives (8.34-38). True honour and greatness in the community which gathers around Jesus lies not in courting the esteem of others, but in embracing a new understanding of honour based on ignominious service, suffering and disgrace. Significantly, however, this is not only instruction given to others, but is crucially the basis for Jesus' own way of life and, ultimately, his death (as 10.42-45 makes clear).<sup>43</sup>

As Mark moves towards the passion narrative, it becomes apparent that Jesus has a choice over his own death. Our author stresses Jesus' courage and fortitude as he makes his way to Jerusalem in obedience to the will of God, even though he knows how things will end (8.31-2, 9.30-32, 10.32-22). The Gethsemane scene points in the same direction. Although commentators since Celsus have tended to stress Jesus' strong emotions here, the significance of the scene (as Origen pointed out) is surely to be found in Jesus' final words to the Father,

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<sup>40</sup> For example, the deaths of Pompey and Julius Caesar following the assassins' stabs (Plutarch, *Pompey* 79.1-4; Suetonius, *Jul.* 82.2).

<sup>41</sup> See E. S. Malbon, 'History, Theology, Story: Re-Contextualizing Mark's "Messianic Secret" as Characterization' in C. W. Skinner and M. R. Hauge, eds., *Character Studies and the Gospel of Mark* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014) 35-56.

<sup>42</sup> On slavery in Graeco-Roman society, see I. A. H. Combes, *The Metaphor of Slavery in the Writings of the Early Church: From the New Testament to the Beginning of the Fifth Century* (Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 21-48.

<sup>43</sup> On these central chapters, see especially Kaminouchi, A. D. 'But it is Not So Among You': *Echoes of Power in Mark 10.32-45* (London: T&T Clark, 2003) and D. F. Watson, *Honor Among Christians: The Cultural Key to the Messianic Secret* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010). On Paul's rather similar use of slavery metaphors to describe the new status of Christian believers, see Combes, *Metaphor*, 77-92.

‘not what I want but what you want’ (14.36).<sup>44</sup> The Markan Jesus submits to his cruel death in the full knowledge of what he is doing. When his ‘hour’ arrives (14.41) he is ready, and welcomes the arresting party with a quiet dignity (14.43-50).<sup>45</sup> Such foreknowledge and resolve finds many parallels within the biographical tradition: Apollonius, for example, similarly knew when his end was upon him, as did Demonax, who took steps to speed it up.<sup>46</sup> Philo’s Moses, too, strikingly prophesied not only his own death but also his subsequent ascension into heaven (*Mos.* 2.288-91). Clearly, then, the ‘good’ philosopher knows when his end has come and does not shirk from embracing it.

It is also worth noting that Mark is quite clear that Jesus has done nothing to deserve death. He draws on the motif of the unjust ruler who acts against the hero out of ‘envy’ (*phthonos*). This tradition was exemplified by Socrates where the state acted unjustly against a pious man (*Apol.* 28a), but it is also found in numerous other *bioi* and martyr literature.<sup>47</sup> ‘Envy,’ of course, is a clever trope: it not only implies that any accusations are unfounded, but also raises the standing of the one envied.<sup>48</sup> It is important to note that Mark does not say that Jesus was *innocent*<sup>49</sup>; the charges are true - Jesus *is* the Christ, the Son of the Blessed (14.61) and, in a sense, he *is* a King (15:2, 26). The problem is that opponents cannot see it.

For Mark, then, Jesus’ free choice to submit to the will of the Father, even though he has done nothing deserving death, is the ultimate expression of what it means to be a ‘slave of all.’ As David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey and Donald Michie note, Jesus’

‘crucifixion is the ultimate consequence of a life of service and of his refusal to oppress others to save himself. And in this tragic execution – misunderstood, falsely accused, abandoned – he is least of all.’<sup>50</sup>

It was surely with this end in sight that Mark composed his carefully integrated central chapters.<sup>51</sup> His artful composition shows that there is no mismatch between what Jesus teaches and his death; he remains true to his teaching to the very end. And, just as significantly, what he demands of others is no more than he is prepared to undergo himself.

Jesus’ lonely and voluntary death has theological significance for Mark: it acts as a ransom and offers those who follow him a new way to relate to God.<sup>52</sup> Once *he* has drunk the

<sup>44</sup> Origen, *Contra Celsum* 2.24. M. D. Hooker argues it is unlikely that Jesus’ followers would have invented a scene such as this one, and that the pull would have been towards crafting a calmer, more serene narrative, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to St Mark* (London: A. C. Black, 1995) 346. In my view, it is difficult to know what the earliest Christians would have found useful, and Mark’s note that the disciples were sleeping does not inspire too much faith in the historical accuracy of his account at this point! For a similar reading to the one taken here, see A. Y. Collins, ‘From Noble Death to Crucified Messiah,’ *NTS* 40 (1994) 481-503.

<sup>45</sup> On the concept of the appointed ‘hour’ or divine sign, see Droge and Tabor, *A Noble Death*, 31-5, 37, 41-2.

<sup>46</sup> Philostratus, *Apoll.* 8.28; Lucian, *Dem.* 65.

<sup>47</sup> So Julius Caesar (Plutarch, *Julius Caesar* 69) and many of Cornelius Nepos’ generals (Themistocles, 2.8; Chabrias, 3; Datames 5; Timoleon, 20.1; and Hannibal, 23.3). The author of 1 Clement puts the deaths of Peter and Paul down to envy (5.2.5), though this was no doubt inspired by the death of Jesus.

<sup>48</sup> Although the term ‘envy’ does not appear until 15.10, it is clearly what drives Jesus’ Jerusalem opponents from the start (see 11.18 and 14.1-12).

<sup>49</sup> For Luke, it is important to stress that Jesus was ‘righteous’ (*dikaios*), see Luke 23.47.

<sup>50</sup> D. Rhoads, J. Dewey and D. Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (3<sup>rd</sup> edn. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012) 111.

<sup>51</sup> On the careful composition here, see N. Perrin, *What is Readcation Criticism?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970) 41-63.

<sup>52</sup> The literature here is extensive; besides the commentaries, useful discussions can be found in Hooker, *Not Ashamed*, 47-67; C. K. Barrett, ‘The Background of Mark 10.45’ in A. J. B. Higgins, ed., *New Testament Essays: Studies in Honour of Thomas Walter Manson* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959) 1-18; Kaminouchi, ‘But it is Not So Among You’; S. Dowd and E. S. Malbon, ‘The Significance of Jesus’ Death in Mark: Narrative Context and Authorial Audience,’ *JBL* 125 (2006) 271-97; A. Y. Collins, ‘Mark’s Interpretation of the Death of Jesus,’ *JBL* 128 (2009) 545-54; and C. Breytenbach, ‘Narrating the Death of Jesus in Mark,’ *ZNW* 105 (2014) 153-68.

‘cup’ of suffering, however, others can follow in his path. Like other biographers, Mark has consistently presented his subject as a model for disciples, and this continues into the passion narrative in a series of contrasts (or *synkriseis*). In Gethsemane, our author sets up a striking contrast between Jesus who prays alone to the father, anxiously awaiting his ‘hour,’ and an inner group of disciples who are blissfully unaware of the crisis in which they find themselves (14.32-42). Similarly, Jesus’ calm acceptance of the arresting party, who have no need of their swords and clubs (14.48), contrasts with the panicked flight of the disciples and even a young man who runs naked into the night (14.50-51). Throughout the scandalously unjust Jewish trial, Jesus stands his ground before the High Priest and answers clearly and openly (14.62), while Peter outside, accosted by a lowly serving maid, refuses to confess that he is a follower of Jesus in a desperate attempt to save his life (14.53-72).

If our author wrote for an audience who had experienced (or feared) persecution, an emphasis on the paradigmatic death of the leader is not hard to understand. Such an audience may have been particularly interested in Jesus’ demise, seeking reassurance that, despite its horror and suffering, Jesus remained true to his teaching until the end. If called upon to make the ultimate sacrifice, his example would provide a model for their own.<sup>53</sup>

### *A Wider-Angled Lens*

Of course, this is not all that Mark wants to say about Jesus’ crucifixion. Space does not allow us to explore the fascinating way that he plays with Roman ideas of kingship and power in these final scenes, destabilizing traditional meanings and replacing them with highly subversive and counter-cultural ways of looking at the world.<sup>54</sup> The juxtaposition of Jesus with Barabbas, effectively replacing what might have been a final speech before Pilate, shows how far Jesus is from the warlike insurrectionaries who so recently led the nation to disaster.<sup>55</sup> And the clever framing of the narrative with themes associated both with the Roman triumph<sup>56</sup> and the highly visual spectacles of death known from the arena,<sup>57</sup> all conspire to dismantle traditional concepts of honour and shame, first and last, slave and free.

But in other ways, Mark is entirely conventional. The deaths of extraordinary people were always accompanied by signs and portents, and Jesus is no exception.<sup>58</sup> As he hangs on

<sup>53</sup> 1 Tim 6.12-14 similarly remembers Jesus’ trial before Pilate in terms of a prototype martyr for followers to emulate; see also 1 Peter 2.20-25, 4.12-14. Useful discussions can be found in Hooker, *Not Ashamed*, 47-67; Rhoads, Dewey and Michie, *Mark as Story*, 113-5; and G. van Oyen, ‘The Meaning of the Death of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark: A Real Reader Perspective’ in G. van Oyen and T. Shepherd, eds., *The Trial and Death of Jesus*, 49-68.

<sup>54</sup> H. Leander, ‘With Homi Bhabha at the Jerusalem City Gates: A Postcolonial Reading of the “Triumphal” Entry (Mark 11.1-11),’ *JSNT* 32 (2010) 309-335.

<sup>55</sup> On Barabbas, see my article, ‘Barabbas Remembered,’ in B. J. Oropeza, C. K. Robertson and D. Mohrmann, eds., *Jesus and Paul: Global Perspectives in Honor of James D. G. Dunn for his 70<sup>th</sup> Birthday* (London: T&T Clark International, 2009) 59-71.

<sup>56</sup> On the presence of triumphal allusions here, see P. D. Duff, ‘The March of the Divine Warrior and the Advent of the Greco-Roman King: Mark’s Account of Jesus’ Entry into Jerusalem,’ *JBL* 111 (1992) 55-71; T. E. Schmidt, ‘Mark 15.6-32: The Crucifixion Narrative and the Roman Triumphal Procession,’ *NTS* 41 (1995) 1-18; and A. T. Georgia, ‘Translating the Triumph: Reading Mark’s Crucifixion Narrative against a Roman Ritual of Power,’ *JSNT* 36 (2013): 17-38. On irony more generally, see J. Camery-Hoggatt, *Irony in Mark’s Gospel: Text and Subtext* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992), esp. 171-7.

<sup>57</sup> On the theatricality of Roman death, see Coleman, ‘Fatale Charades’; C. A. Barton, ‘Savage Miracles: The Redemption of Lost Honor in Roman Society and the Sacrament of the Gladiator and the Martyr,’ *Representations* 45 (1994) 41-71; J. Harley, ‘The Aesthetics of Death: The Theatrical Elaboration of Ancient Roman Blood Spectacles,’ *Theatre History Studies* 19 (1998) 89-97; and C. Edwards, ‘Modelling Roman Suicide? The Afterlife of Cato,’ *Economy and Society* 34 (2005) 200-22. All of these themes will be explored further in my forthcoming book, *Mark the First Biographer of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans).

<sup>58</sup> A series of prodigies occurred after the deaths of Julius Caesar (Plutarch, *Julius Caesar*, 69.4-5) and King Cleomenes (Plutarch, *Cleomenes*, 39), and before that of Augustus (Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, 56.29.3-6).

the cross, the “whole earth” is plunged into the darkness of a solar eclipse, a phenomenon often associated with a crime or the death of a king.<sup>59</sup> At the moment of his death, the Temple veil rips from top to bottom (15:38),<sup>60</sup> most likely a sign of the impending destruction of Jerusalem.<sup>61</sup> And afterwards the disappearance of the body indicates the ‘translation’ of Jesus into heaven.<sup>62</sup> Together, these signs show that Jesus’ death will be vindicated. He has gone to the cross not only in obedience to the Father but in a manner consistent with his teaching. In the world of radially new values that Mark presents, Jesus’ shameful end is in fact the triumph of God’s Son – for those with ‘eyes to see.’

And this, I suggest, is what the centurion ‘sees.’ What prompts his declaration is not the darkness, nor the power of Jesus’ dying shout, nor even the tearing of the Temple curtain.<sup>63</sup> Still less does the centurion articulate the necessity for the Messiah to suffer (could any of Mark’s Christ-following audience really be in any doubt about that by the 70s CE?). The Roman’s remark is prompted – as Mark clearly indicates – by observing the way in which Jesus dies (*idōn . . . hoti houtōs exepneusen*; 15.39). From his vantage point, facing Jesus (*ex evantias autou*), even a hostile executioner recognizes Jesus’ shameful death for

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Lucian makes fun of both his protagonist and those he dubs ‘fools and dullards’ by mischievously inventing a series of wondrous events which he claims accompanied Peregrinus’ death (*Peregrinus* 39, and 40).

<sup>59</sup> See Pliny, *Natural History* 2.45-46, 53-58; Philo, *On Providence* 2.50. Within the biographical tradition, they are linked with the death of Julius Caesar (Plutarch, *Julius Caesar* 69.4-5; Virgil, *Georgics*, 1.466-8; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 4.64), Augustus (Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 56.29.5-6), Herod (Josephus, *Ant.* 17.167), and the philosopher Carneades (Diogenes Laertius 4.64). Eclipses might also indicate the outcome of a battle (Herodotus, *Persian Wars* 7.37; Plutarch, *Aemilius Paulus* 17.7-11; Plutarch, *Pelopidas* 31.1-3) or warn of coming treachery (Virgil, *Georgics*, 1.461-5).

<sup>60</sup> Scholarly discussion has been preoccupied with which veil is meant here, though as M. de Jonge pointed out over 30 years ago, the fact that Mark does not specify which veil he has in mind suggests that the matter was of little concern to him, ‘Matthew 27:51 in Early Christian Exegesis,’ *HTR* 79 (1986) 67-79. See discussions in H. L. Chronis, ‘The Torn Veil: Cultus and Christology in Mark 15:37-39,’ *JBL* 101 (1982) 97-114; Collins, *Mark*, 760; Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, 1057; D. M. Gurtner, ‘LXX Syntax and the Identity of the NT Veil,’ *NT* 47 (2005) 344-53; Gurtner, ‘The Rending of the Veil and Markan Christology: “Unveiling” the ΥΙΟΣ ΘΕΟΥ (Mark 15.38-39),’ *Biblical Interpretation* 15 (2007) 292-306; D. Ulansey, ‘The Heavenly Veil Torn: Mark’s Cosmic Inclusio,’ *JBL* 110 (1991) 123-5; and J. B. Chance, ‘The Cursing of the Temple and the Tearing of the Veil in the Gospel of Mark,’ *Biblical Interpretation* 15 (2007) 268-91. Interestingly, tradition associates the veil with Rome (where it perhaps formed part of the Flavian procession); according to *B. Git* 56b, Titus slashed the veil with his sword after the defeat of Jerusalem and used it to wrap up the temple vessels in the sanctuary; see D. M. Gurtner, ‘The Veil of the Temple in History and Legend,’ *JETS* 49 (2006) 97-114, here 107 and 110.

<sup>61</sup> On portents attending the destruction of the Temple, see Josephus, *War* 6.288-331; Tacitus, *Histories* 5.13; and *y. Yoma* 6.3 and *b. Yoma* 4.1 (for discussion of these texts, see R. L. Plummer, ‘Something Awry in the Temple? The Rending of the Temple Veil and Early Jewish Sources that Report Unusual Phenomena in the Temple around AD 30,’ *JETS* 48 (2005) 301-16). Intriguingly, the first century *Lives of the Prophets* predicts that the temple will be destroyed by a western nation and that the curtain will be torn into small pieces (the relevant section is attributed to Habbakuk, 12.10-13). Those who see the torn veil as a sign of the destruction of Jerusalem include J. R. Donahue, *Are You the Christ? The Trial Narrative in the Gospel of Mark* (Missoula: SBL, 1973), 203; Hooker, *Commentary*, 377-8; Chance, ‘Cursing’; Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, 1066-7; and Dowd and Malbon, ‘Significance,’ p. 296. A number of these scholars see the breaking down of barriers as a secondary meaning here.

<sup>62</sup> For detailed discussion, see R. C. Miller, ‘Mark’s Empty Tomb and Other Translation Fables in Classical Antiquity,’ *JBL* 129 (2010) 759-76.

<sup>63</sup> Several scholars lately have argued that the centurion’s words here are to be taken as ambiguous or even ironic – see D. H. Juel, *A Master of Surprise: Mark Interpreted* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 74; W. Shiner, ‘The Ambiguous Pronouncement of the Centurion and the shrouding of Meaning in Mark,’ *JSNT* 78 (2000) 3-22; Goodacre, ‘Scripturalization’; and N. Eubank, ‘Dying with Power: Mark 15,39 from Ancient to Modern Interpretation,’ *Biblica* 95 (2014) 247-68. The motif of the ‘converted’ executioner, however, is widespread in martyriological literature, and is likely to be what Mark had in mind; see J. Pobee, ‘The Cry of the Centurion – a Cry of Defeat,’ in E. Bammel, ed., *The Trial of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1970) 91-102. For a similar reading to the one here, see K. R. Iverson, ‘A Centurion’s ‘Confession’: A Performance-Critical Analysis of Mark 15:39,’ *JBL* 130 (2011) 329-50

what it ‘truly’ is (*alēthōs*): a perfect expression of his teaching and a confirmation of his status as God’s Son.

### *Conclusion*

Jesus’ crucifixion was an attempt by the rulers of his day to consign not only his body but also his memory to oblivion. In many ways, Mark’s *bios* can be seen as an act of defiance, a refusal to accept the Roman sentence and an attempt to shape the way in which both his life and death should be remembered. His work takes the place of a funeral ovation, outlining Jesus’ way of life and pointing to the family of believers who succeed him.<sup>64</sup> While men of higher class and greater worldly distinction might have had their epitaphs set in stone, Mark provides his hero with a written monument to a truly worthy life.<sup>65</sup>

Mark redeems Jesus’ death not by casting it as ‘noble’ or conventionally ‘honourable,’ but by showing that it conforms perfectly to his counter-cultural teaching. Like the good philosopher, Jesus has a fitting death, an extension of his earlier way of life. Presumably this was Mark’s strategy from the start, even as he planned the *bios* and decided which aspects of Jesus’ teaching to emphasize in that all-important middle section of the work. We might suspect that his account convinced only those who were willing to be convinced by it (Luke and John clearly thought that it could be improved). But still, as the basis for all subsequent narrative retellings, at least all those that have survived, Mark’s attempt to match Jesus’ death to his earlier life and teaching was to have a profound effect on the way the Christian church would remember its founder for the next two millennia.

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<sup>64</sup> On the funeral oration, see Kyle, *Spectacles*, 130-3; also Polybius 6.53-4.

<sup>65</sup> Hope notes that the Latin word *monumentum* can mean both a material structure and a written text, *Death*, 71. Tacitus assumes that all undocumented lives are soon forgotten: ‘Many will be engulfed in oblivion as if they had no name or fame. But Agricola, whose story is told for posterity, will survive’ (*Agricola* 46).